

Q : What is morphology? Write a detailed note on it.

Ans : What is morphology:?

The scientific study of the smallest meaningful units which further form words is called *morphology*. For example, in the word 'carelessness', there are three smallest meaningful units, viz.² 'care', '-less', and '-ness'. These smallest meaningful units are called *morphemes*. In morphology, we study the rules for the formation of words. That is why it is also called *word grammar*.

The word 'morphology' consists of two word elements: 'morph-' which means 'form', and '-ology' which means 'the study of'. Thus, the meaning of 'morphology' is 'the study of form'. Originally, this word was used only in biological sciences. Even now biologists use this word to refer to that branch of biology which deals with the form (and structure) of plants and animals. It was probably in the nineteenth century that this word was used for the first time as a technical term in language studies. Now in linguistics, it refers to that branch of language studies which deals with the smallest meaningful units (e.g. morphemes) of a word.

While studying a word for its morphemes, we must testify it with two experiments. First, there must be the addition of meaning and not the distortion of it. Secondly, when we divide a word into smaller units, the remaining parts must be meaningful.

As has been explained above, the English word 'carelessness' can be divided only into three meaningful units which cannot be segmented further and these meaningful units are 'care', '-less', and '-ness'. Since there must not be any meaning distortion while dividing a word into meaningful units (i.e. morphemes), we cannot further divide 'care' into 'c-' and 'are', or into 'car' and '-e'. Since 'c-' and '-e' are not meaningful units left and the meaning of 'are' or 'car' is totally different (i.e. distorted) from the segment 'care', they cannot be separated from 'care'. On the other hand, the word 'away' contains two smallest meaningful units, viz. 'a-' meaning 'without' and 'way' meaning 'route'.

Morphology : its two types

Morphology is of two types – *inflectional* and *derivational*. Inflectional morphology is that branch of morphology which deals with the variation in form of words for grammatical purposes, as illustrated by 'cat/cats', 'eat/eats/ate/eating/eaten', and 'fast/faster/fastest'. Derivational morphology (also called lexical morphology) is that branch of morphology which deals with word formation, as illustrated by 'drive (v)/driver (n)/driving (n)'.

¹ **morphology** – the scientific study of words.

² **viz.** – namely.

Roughly speaking, an inflection produces another form of the same word (e.g. 'drives/drove/driven/driving), and has a grammatical function; whereas, derivation produces (or derives) a new word (e.g. 'driver' from 'drive'), and has a lexical function.

In other words, inflectional affixes (or more particularly 'suffixes') change the grammatical status of the same word; whereas derivational affixes always create a new word and are part of the word formation process.

What is a morpheme?

The smallest meaningful unit in a language is called a *morpheme*. For example, in the word 'unfriendly', there are three morphemes – 'un-', 'friend', and '-ly'. A morpheme is an abstract semantic unit which may or may not be realized. For example, a noun plural in English usually consists of two morphemes, a noun stem and the morpheme {PLURAL}; however, their realization in terms of structure varies as either regular or irregular, as illustrated by such plurals as 'cats', 'dogs', 'boxes', 'sheep', 'men', 'women', 'children', 'feet', 'mice', 'formulae', 'criteria', 'indices', 'cherubim', and 'oxen'.

It is widely used convention to enclose morphemes within braces. Thus 'feet' might be represented as {foot} + {PLURAL}; the word 'stopped' is composed of two morphemes, {stop} + {PAST}; similarly, the word 'men' consists of two morphemes, {man} + {PLURAL}; and 'worse' consists of two morphemes, {bad} + {COMPARATIVE}.

The convention followed for referring to a morpheme is to use one of its regular morphs or shapes and to put it between braces, e.g. {-s} for the morpheme {PLURAL}, {-ed} for the morpheme {PAST}, and {-er} for the morpheme {COMPARATIVE}.

[Excellent in Stageberg p-95, See also R.L. Trask p-175]

What are free and bound morphemes?

Morphemes are variously classified as *free* or *bound*. A free morpheme is one which can be used as a word by itself. A bound morpheme, on the other hand, is one which can only appear in the structure of a word in conjunction with at least one other morpheme; it cannot be used as a word by itself. In 'boys', for example, {boy} is a free morpheme, whereas {-s} is a bound morpheme. In 'went', {go} is a free morpheme and {-ed} is a bound morpheme.

In certain languages of the world, in Chinese and Vietnamese for example, nearly all the morphemes are free. For the vast majority of languages, however, the distinction between a free morpheme and a bound morpheme is relevant and useful.

[See p-8 of DT]